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SABINA

Sabina was a handsome woman. She had a good figure and a lovely face with an upturned nose and large gray eyes. She was tall and lively, spirited and full of fun. Sabina loved music and poetry.

When Sabina was born, her mother was well into her forties and was surprised and a little ashamed of having become pregnant at such an advanced age. Nevertheless, the baby was welcomed, loved, and indulged beyond imagination.

When Sabina was eight years old, her parents bought her a second-hand piano and she started taking lessons from an old maid, a friend of the family, who lived in the same apartment house. Sabina never became an accomplished pianist. She was talented but after a few years, her parents could no longer afford to pay for her piano lessons.

At the age of eighteen, after finishing high school, Sabina started to work at her parents' small dry good store. By then, her parents were elderly and needed her help.

With her very first paycheck, Sabina bought a phonograph and later, records of classical music and opera. In her free time, she played her piano and listened to her beloved records.

By the time she was thirty, everybody realized that Sabina was getting on in age and would probably remain an old maid. But when a matchmaker introduced her to Pinchas, the naïve inexperienced Sabina fell immediately in love.

Pinchas was a darkly handsome small town man, a few years Sabina's junior, for whom marriage to an educated big city girl was a real career. After their marriage, Pinchas and Sabina took over her parents' store and managed it together. Sabina became pregnant and gave birth to a little girl who she named Tosca after the heroine of her favorite opera.

Tosca was raised by a series of governesses and later, when the business began to fail, by maids. Tosca spent a lot of time at our home, playing with my sister, who was two years older than her.

Poor little Tosca did not inherit her parents' handsomeness. She was a homely shy child, nearsighted and wearing thick glasses.

Meanwhile, Sabina's marriage deteriorated rapidly. Shortly after Tosca was born, Pinchas started to run around

with all kinds of women. My poor aunt did not know how to handle the situation. She became depressed and sad.

There was no more time for music and poetry. Every spare minute, Sabina devoted herself to her only sunshine, the little girl whom she adored.

Business at the store also began to deteriorate, and it was Sabina alone who tried desperately to hold onto it. Pinchas, busy with his "social life," frequently would disappear for days at a time.

There was talk of divorce. I often heard my parents whispering and discussing it, but Sabina refused all suggestions. Her pride was deeply hurt and the shame over the failure of her marriage was overwhelming. The poor woman became resigned to her fate and suffered in silence. By the time Tosca started school, Sabina was poor, earning only a very meager living.

Tosca was nine years old when World War II broke out and the Soviets moved into Lwow. Overnight, her parents, as owners of a private enterprise, became "capitalists" in the eyes of the Communist regime. The merchandise in the store was confiscated. Lazy good-for-nothing Pinchas had to find a job.

Money was scarce. Sabina managed somehow to get by. She remained at home and, for the first time, Tosca had a fulltime mother devoted completely to her. Pinchas' absenteeism seemed to bother Sabina less because of her newly found closeness with her little girl.

There was opera music in their little apartment. Sabina was teaching Tosca how to play the piano and was delighted with her daughter's progress. Both mother and daughter blossomed from all of the warmth and closeness between them, and ugly duckling Tosca became prettier and more outgoing.

In 1941, when the war broke out between Russia and Germany, Sabina was forty years old and still a good-looking woman. Her light brown hair was full and luxurious. She dressed neatly and always appeared freshly scrubbed and smelling of lavender toilet water. For many years, I remember associating the smell of lavender with Sabina.

A middle-aged lawyer, a widower, fell in love with Sabina during the two years of Soviet occupation and urged her to get a divorce from Pinchas. Sabina refused. Who knew her real reason? She would always say to her sisters, "Please let's not talk about it." And that was it.

I imagined, in my romantic teen-aged mind, that Sabina and the lawyer had a flowering love affair and that Sabina secretly met him at night in his apartment where they made passionate love. In reality, as I later found out, there was nothing sexual about their relationship. They were simply old fashioned and puritanical. Their "love affair" never progressed further than talking, holding hands, and an occasional kiss.

Tosca loved Paul, the lawyer, who brought her candies and sometimes a little scarf or blouse.

This idyllic situation abruptly ended one day in the fall of 1941, when Paul was taken from the street by the German police and disappeared. We found out later that he was shot when he refused to lick an SS man's boots.

Sabina and Tosca were shattered but hardly had time to think about their loss. The destruction of Lwow's Jewry began swiftly and immediately.

We were thrown out of our beautiful apartment; Sabina and Tosca were thrown out of their poor and small one. We moved to our uncle Benjamin's apartment, which was situated in the "Jewish sector." Each of its six rooms was occupied by a different family. We shared one room with my aging bedridden grandmother, my parents, and thirteen-year-old sister. My grandmother died later in that same room, still bedridden and riddled with pain.

Sabina, Pinchas, and Tosca shared another room in Uncle Benjamin's apartment.

We were all hungry and frightened. Our main nourishment consisted of potato peel and a little bread that we got with our new ration cards. We all began to lose weight. Sabina and Tosca were emaciated. Sabina's pretty gray eyes were sunken in her olive-complexioned face. Every bit of food she had she gave to Tosca, leaving for herself only crumbs.

Several weeks had passed since grandmother's death punctuated with constant "actions."

Pinchas disappeared and we were told that he had shackled up with a woman who had connections with the Germans and had food. Sabina's shame and hurt pride were enormous. Now everyone at the apartment knew of her disgrace.

Almost everyone at the apartment worked in order to temporarily be permitted to live. Only Sabina, Tosca, my mother, and a few others in the house did not work. They simply did not have the money needed in order to be accepted in factories that worked for the Germans.

One evening, a few months after moving into Uncle Benjamin's apartment, Sabina knocked on our door. In her hand, she held a small leather pouch with jewelry that she had managed to hold onto. With tears in her eyes, she said to my mother, "I don't think I will live much longer. Please take care of my child and keep these few pieces of jewelry for her."

Only two days later while we were at work, a group of SS men surrounded the apartment house and whoever opened the door was taken to the courtyard and shot. It was Sabina whose bloody lifeless body was lying in the courtyard together with others for two days.

We kept Tosca in our room and wouldn't let her out for fear that she would see the body of her beloved mother.

Tosca finally understood that her mother was dead and would never come back. A few days later Pinchas showed up and took Tosca away to live with his sister.

Sabina was the first one in our family to die.

Rena Berliner
Summer 1985

